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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 006182

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SUBJECT: RECORD-SETTING ADVANCE VOTING AHEAD OF THAI
ELECTIONS

REF: A. BANGKOK 6157 (ADVANCE VOTING)

- [1](#)B. BANGKOK 6077 (OFFICIAL BIAS)
- [1](#)C. BANGKOK 6007 (ARMY INTERFERENCE)
- [1](#)D. BANGKOK 5914 (DISQUALIFICATIONS)
- [1](#)E. BANGKOK 5881 (OATHS AND INSULTS)

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Officials announced that a record-breaking three million absentee and advance voters cast their ballots December 15-16, ahead of scheduled December 23 elections. Observers lodged some procedural complaints, but international election monitors said the vote was conducted in a "competent manner." Political party representatives offered different explanations for the higher-than-expected advance voting turnout, and also pressed election officials to promptly investigate complaints. Officials promised speedy inquiries into reported voting irregularities. An outspoken election commissioner complained to us that she and other commissioners had received threats, but indicated the Election Commission remained committed to holding elections on schedule. A major Thai media organization plans to conduct a parallel vote count on election day and to rapidly and publicly disseminate election results. End summary.

RECORD-BREAKING ADVANCE VOTING

[1](#)2. (U) On December 17, the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) announced that a record breaking 2.97 million advance voters had cast ballots throughout the country on December 15-16 ahead of planned December 23 elections, indicating that approximately 7% of eligible voters have already exercised their voting rights. Of these advance voters, 1.8 million people -- most of them in Bangkok and nearby provinces -- cast absentee votes for candidates running in other provinces. The remaining 1.1 million advance voters on December 15-16 were individuals who are unable to vote on December 23 (such as poll workers). These 1.1 million voters, who voted for candidates running in constituencies where they normally cast their ballots, did not need to

register with the ECT in advance. Overall, 88% of the total number of registered absentee voters turned out to vote. In comparison, only about 350,000 absentee voters registered to vote in the 2005 election, and less than half actually cast absentee ballots.

¶3. (C) Embassy staff observing the advance voting on December 15 and 16 at twelve different locations in Bangkok and surrounding provinces reported no obvious voter fraud or visible irregularities. While we did observe overcrowding and long lines at some polling locations, ECT officials seemed to be processing the unprecedented workload without incident. Embassy observers reported especially long lines at polling areas near military installations and in lower-income neighborhoods. In Samut Prakan Province southeast of Bangkok, we observed several buses transporting voters to polling stations for absentee voting. (Note: Election laws circumscribe the ability of private individuals and companies to provide voters transportation to the polls -- it is unclear if the observed bus transportation violated election laws. End note).

¶4. (U) On December 17, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), which deployed at least 32 observers to monitor these elections, reported several "administrative errors and inefficiencies," but generally considered the advance voting to have been administered in a "competent manner." ANFREL released a statement that identified the following concerns:

-- Individuals standing outside some polling stations at Chonburi, Nonthaburi, and Pathum Thanui were able to see voters' ballots as they were voting;

-- Four ballot boxes in Nakhon Ratchasima were not sealed

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properly on December 16;

-- Some voters did not understand new election procedures, and voters did not appear to be well-informed about party and candidate platforms;

-- There were allegations that employers and army officials instructed employees and army units to vote for particular candidates;

-- Political parties were not proactively seeking to observe the movement of ballot boxes.

¶5. (C) We reached out on December 18 to prominent political parties to solicit their views on advance voting. Pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) Deputy Leader Yongyuth Tiypairat attributed the high advanced voting turnout to military efforts designed to mobilize voters to vote for candidates opposed to the PPP. Yongyuth expressed concerns about the storage of ballot boxes containing ballots cast in advance, fearing that the ballots in these boxes could be manipulated to favor candidates supported by the Council for National Security (CNS).

¶6. (C) In contrast, Democrat Party spokesman Ong-ard Klampaiboon attributed the high turnout to PPP efforts to mobilize support from registered absentee voters from the Northeast, who are currently working in Bangkok and surrounding provinces. Ong-ard speculated these voters would vote overwhelmingly for the PPP. Chart Thai Party Deputy Leader Somsak Prisananutagul, however, did not believe any particular political party influenced voter turnout, but rather attributed the record-setting numbers to a heightened level of political consciousness. Both the Democrat and PPP officials opined that many voters wanted to take advantage of the December 24 public holiday and voted in advance to enjoy their long weekend.

¶7. (U) A few NGOs and political activists called on the ECT to promptly investigate allegations that voters were

unlawfully transported to the polls. Activists also expressed concerns that ECT officials in Bangkok permitted some voters to cast advanced ballots without requesting a written explanation, required by law, as to why these voters were unable to vote on December 23. The media reported that local election and government officials were initially confused over where to store ballot boxes. Political parties publicly demanded that the ECT ensure the integrity of ballot boxes prior to December 23. ECT officials publicly announced all ballot boxes would be appropriately guarded, and announced plans to promptly investigate all complaints. (Note: Election regulations call for the advance ballots to be sent to the ECT of the relevant constituency. There, ballots will be counted on election day and the totals added to the vote count from polling units. End note.)

ELECTION COMMISSIONER THREATENED

18. (C) The political pressure is mounting, and some of those involved in the process are showing the strain. Election Commissioner Sodsri Sattayatham told the press over the weekend that she had been receiving death threats. On December 17, we got an odd message from an ECT staffer, saying that Sodsri had left the ECT building to escape a hostile mob, and had said she would go to the US Embassy. Following up on these reports, we determined that a small group of about 100 peaceful protesters had petitioned the ECT to dissolve the pro-Thaksin PPP, based on alleged campaign violations. We spoke to Commissioner Sodsri by phone, who in truth was not traveling to the Embassy. Sodsri relayed her concerns about threats she said she and the other commissioners had been receiving. She said that one group threatening her were those who insisted the PPP should be dissolved. Another group she believed was behind the threats were those who wanted the elections delayed; she believed that some elements of the military were included in this group, although she had no way of knowing just who was behind the phone calls. Sodsri explained that the ECT could not

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dissolve the PPP, as this was an issue for the courts to decide. Sodsri insisted that it would not be right to delay the elections, pointing to the high turnout during advance voting, which demonstrated that the Thai people were eager to vote.

19. (C) Comment: Commissioner Sodsri is often characterized as pro-military, but her concerns at the moment were focused on anti-PPP partisans. Sodsri has made exaggerated claims of threats in the past; based on our conversation, she seemed genuinely concerned, but probably overdramatized her personal situation. We are skeptical that such a senior official is in real physical danger. However, her account shows the strain put on the people trying to carry off this difficult election. Despite Sodsri's pro-coup reputation, she seemed very sincere in her support for holding the elections on schedule; we expressed our strong agreement with her on this point.

MEDIA PLANS "QUICK COUNT"

110. (SBU) Officials at the Nation Group, a prominent Thai media organization, told us on December 14 that they plan to deploy more than 20,000 staffers and volunteers around the country to conduct a parallel "quick" vote count when ballots are counted at polling stations nation-wide on December 23. (Note: Election regulations call for election officials to publicly count the ballots at approximately 88,000 polling stations across the country when the polls close. The official results are relayed up the ECT hierarchy and are therefore slow to reach the central ECT in Bangkok. End note.) Volunteers will feed the results of the count in areas where they are deployed to a National Election Center based at Sripatum University near Bangkok, which plans to

rapidly disseminate unofficial election results to other media outlets and to the Nation Group's web site (www.nationmultimedia.com). The Police Department will also likely conduct a similar parallel count for the exclusive use of Election Commission officials.

¶11. (C) Comment: The Nation Group's count appears to be independent of ECT efforts and should provide a useful comparison for officially released ECT results. Assuming unofficial and official counts largely mirror each other, the Nation Group's efforts will ideally increase confidence in the legitimacy of official election results. End comment.
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